



plains garter snake

Thamnophis radix

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| Kingdom: | Animalia |
| Division/Phylum: | Chordata - vertebrates |
| Class: | Reptilia |
| Order: | Squamata |
| Family: | Colubridae |

Features

The plains garter snake ranges from 15 to 28 inches long. The name "garter snake" comes from the striped appearance of the body, similar to that of the garters that once were commonly used to support men's socks. Three stripes run lengthwise down the body. Dark spots are located between the stripes and below the side stripes. The stripe in the center of the back is yellow or orange, while those on the sides are yellow-gray. The lips have black bars and the gray-green belly has two rows of black spots. The back is brown or green. The scales are keeled (ridged).

Natural History

The plains garter snake lives in river valleys, prairie ponds, sloughs, meadows, and pastures. It is typically a marsh edge or streamside animal. It once was common in vacant lots in cities. It eats frogs, toads, salamanders, fish, tadpoles, earthworms, leeches, small mammals, and birds. Active in the day, this snake may be seen basking in the sun. It takes

shelter under objects on the ground and is believed to overwinter in abandoned rodent burrows. When alarmed, the plains garter snake may flatten its body and release fecal matter and an unpleasant musk from glands at the base of the tail. Mating occurs in the spring. The female gives birth to 10 to 30 young in late summer, the number depending on her size (the larger her size, the greater the number of eggs) and age. The eastern plains garter snake is found in the eastern one-half of the state and the western plains garter snake in the western one-half with intergrades in between.

Habitats

interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; wet prairies and fens; Mississippi River; Missouri River; bottomland forests

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001.
Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats CD-ROM.